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REGISTERED IN AUSTRALIA FOR POSTING AS A PERIODICAL CATEGORY B

# David Griffiths

# CASTRATING COMMUNITY RADIO

It is difficult for the public to opt for an alternative broadcasting system to the existing ABC and commercial monopoly unless they have experience of these alternatives.

The Labor Government is committed to the establishment of a public broadcasting system. Already, we have two fine music stations 2MBS-FM (Sydney) and 3MBS-FM (Melbourne) and an educational station, 5UV (Adelaide), and public hearings have been held into licences for public broadcasting stations in the Campbelltown area of N.S.W. and the Melbourne metropolitan area.

The definition of community radio is elusive, despite the self-validating declarations and assumptions of its advocates and this has inevitable consequences for public understanding and acceptance, and for the initial development and eventual future of community radio.

Community radio is alternative radio — alternative to ABC and commercial radio. But the ways in which it is alternative are unresolved, questionable and debatable. Few people are interested in the democratisation of radio. Rather, the majority campaign vaguely for 'public', 'community' or 'access' radio without regard to the implications and consequences of their rhetoric. The danger of this unthinking sloganising is that *fait accompli* and the existing broadcasting stations will be described

and accepted as alternatives, not because they are alternatives, but because they are described as alternatives.

It is important to establish the objective of our interest in radio because it has a determining influence on the outcome. There are three clusters of objectives for radio which could be described as follows:

- (a) THE STATUS QUO cluster — generally describes present broadcasting groups and regulating authorities. The status quo groups wish to minimise disruption to the present radio hegemony. These groups are aware of the democratising possibilities for radio.
- (b) THE REFORMIST cluster — generally describes present public broadcasting groups seeking licences from the regulating authorities or public radio groups who have already acquired licences. The reformist groups tend to argue that the ends justify the means.
- (c) THE DEMOCRATIC cluster — generally describes present groups who seek a democratisation of radio whether it is commercial, ABC or community.

## SIMPLICITY MYTH

It is in the simplicity myth that the status quo and reformist clusters merge into a bizarre alliance that will minimise the role and influence of community radio. In essence, the simplicity myth

assumes that community radio is qualitatively different from commercial and ABC radio and as a consequence, requires less resources, staff and funds. The pervasiveness of this myth can be seen in the proposals of the majority of applicants who have applied for a licence to operate a public radio station in the Melbourne metropolitan area.<sup>1</sup>

Seven of the 11 applicants envisaged a full-time staff of five or less. Six of the applicants envisaged annual operating costs of \$60,000 or less.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, these estimates are paralleled by a confidential document on public broadcasting prepared by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board where a full-time staff of seven and annual operating costs of \$71,250 are envisaged.<sup>3</sup>

In proposing and promoting simplistic notions, the community radio movement will have three consequences. FIRST they will stifle access demands on ABC and commercial networks. The ABC will, for instance, be able to refer minority groups demanding time to 3ZZ. The access situation of some groups could in fact worsen. SECOND cheap radio stations without the resources and staff of the ABC and commercial stations will set up a pattern of what community radio is. FINALLY the practical necessity of survival will divert community groups

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into running the station and neglecting the community.

## DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

Professional broadcasters have expertise and skills. We need to use these in developing community radio. We need to avoid however, assuming and accepting that their skills and expertise are their exclusive property, that their skills are more valuable than our own, that we cannot learn these skills and that we cannot criticise the use and allocation of these skills.

In order to do this successfully it is necessary to develop a theory which provides us with a critique of present professional practice, a model for a new professional practice, and a means to achieve this transformation.

This should not, of course, be independent of the need to develop a theory which defines the role of radio in society. The challenge is to transcend and transform the rhetoric of the past and the present. It is necessary to dissociate ourselves from structured and habitual ways of thinking and develop a critique of the status quo. Without such a critique we will be controlled by economic, political and social forces that ultimately undermine our legitimacy and we will become victims of our own pragmatism. The democratisation of radio is a resounding, and irrelevant, phrase unless behind that phrase there is a coherent philosophy, and a process of ongoing clarification and definition that roots the concept in concrete reality. In creating an alternative communications system, we need to be aware of replicating the organisational characteristics of existing radio stations.<sup>4</sup>

A radio station is not an alternative station if it accepts the assumptions of the establishment radio stations about what constitutes good radio, about what constitutes a significant programme and about what constitutes a relevant treatment. Of course, this necessitates an understanding of the major characteristics of the establishment radio stations — elitism, segregation and metalanguage. Elitism is defining for people what is relevant for them by a process of omission and commission. Programmes tend to revolve around the activities and attitudes of celebrities. Segregation is a process by which listeners are isolated from the decision-making process that determines the content of radio. Instead, "gatekeepers" determine what should be said, how it should be said and who says

it. Metalanguage is the discarding of context and referential. Metalanguage freezes events and issues — giving them an impersonal and irrelevant quality that inhibits and prevents listener involvement and commitment.

The lesson for those in Australia who seek to establish an alternative system of broadcasting is that it is extremely difficult for new stations to establish methods of operation that effectively challenge the hegemony of the established media. The prevailing economic and political system will simply not tolerate such a challenge. It is against this sort of reality that it is possible to examine recent and proposed expansions to the radio service in Australia.

In the absence of theory, simplistic notions assume the guise of theory. To claim a station is democratic does not establish its democratic characteristics, yet there are some who assume the self-evident democracy of their proposals.<sup>5</sup>

**Question:** Well what do you define as alternative news, that is what I am asking you?  
**Answer:** Anything else.



**Question:** Anything else other than what?

**Answer:** Well alternative — if you want to get down and get out a dictionary and define alternative. What I see as alternative is, for instance, information on what is happening on the campuses, not only at student level but also at an administration level.<sup>6</sup>

Most proposals for community radio envisage the users operating and controlling their own stations. Users are expected to become their own experts in broadcasting. Personal vanity and membership of community radio groups encourages some people into extravagant assumptions. The following comments were made by members of a community radio group during their negotiations with the ABC regarding the access station 3ZZ:

"I could go home tonight and do a programme".  
"A lot of people will be going direct on the air and you won't have to worry much about preparation".  
"I think they'll be no problems at all in finding programmes".

The question is not whether people can become experts in broadcasting but whether or not they know enough about

their own requirements to avoid being subservient to professional broadcasters. People should be able to distinguish between the professionals' personal judgements about broadcasting and their technical advice for the technical realisation of people's ideas. Even with technical advice, however, it is difficult to separate the advice from the ideological and occupational values that predetermine that advice.

Certain technical decisions have consequences which predetermine people's choices. The staff of the ABC access station 3ZZ made a technical decision concerning their relationship with user groups. In essence, they decided to withdraw their skills and knowledge and make them available on request only to user groups. The onus is placed on users of the station to make specific requests. The making and the nature of the requests, however, depends on users knowing their own requirements and on their knowing what to ask for. It seems to me that in withdrawing their skills and knowledge the staff could achieve the very imposition they seek to avoid.<sup>8</sup>

The critical and relevant issue lies not with professionals refusing to impose their skill and knowledge but rather in the extent to which the community can demand and control the services of the professionals irrespective of the advice and wishes of the professionals.

Hidden manipulation is eliminated when the professional is powerless to prevent community groups from doing what they want to do. The choice should be the community's as to how they wish to use the professional and not predetermined by the professional withdrawing and withholding of their knowledge and skills. The onus is on the professional to persuade the community group as to what is in their best interest.

This is easily achieved at present when it is the professional who controls their resources and their availability.<sup>9</sup> Achieving this new relationship requires a change in consciousness of both people and experts, and the emergence of a new consensus.

### DILETTANTISM

Let us take an extreme statement on community radio and examine its assumptions — that it is possible and desirable for community radio to be run completely on a voluntary basis. Radio stations can be run completely on a voluntary basis. What is possible is not, however, necessarily desirable.<sup>10</sup>

The voluntary school of thinking is I suggest somewhat dilettante in its assessment of radio and its uses and functions. This dilettante school dabbles in radio, seeing it as a hobby in much the same sense as chess, polo, demonstrations and stamp collecting. Pre-eminent in the dilettante school are the music broadcasting stations 2MBS-FM, 3MBS-FM and the ABC station 2JJ. The music buffs now have their own radio stations as well as sophisticated stereo equipment in the home.

I appreciate the philistine implications of these preceding statements and I stress I appreciate the entertaining and informational functions of music, but needless to say, I don't regard music stations as a high priority in the democratisation of radio. It is disappointing that student union applications for radio stations envisage basically music stations.<sup>11</sup>

It is one thing for middle-class people who have resources to argue for voluntary staffing, but it is quite another for them to expect other people who don't have the same time, resources and opportunities to accept staffing

arrangements which accommodate the needs and demands of the middle-class.

There seems to be an assumption that participation is proportionately related to staffing — the less staff the more participation and the more staff the less participation.

But, this is a somewhat parochial and particular definition of participation. I would like to offer an alternative definition. Participation primarily depends on choice — choosing the extent and nature of participation. I suggest, therefore, that a voluntary staffed station predetermines the extent and the level of participation and reduces the choices but it is also a differential reduction which depends on the resources of the participants.

It seems to me that the more you can participate the more you can control. In this sense, control is an accidental process and is the result of opportunities and resources rather than calculated pre-emption.

A possible alternative hypothesis is that the less staff the less participation and the more staff the more participation.

The dilettantes seem to subscribe to a view of equality as the provision of initial equal opportunities — a right to compete on equal terms. In the case of a radio station, equality is seen as a right of access — a right to broadcast. But this is a limited definition of competing on equal terms for it ignores the unequal conditions external to a particular radio station but which determine the opportunities and possibilities of using the station.

The provision of resources does not automatically produce participation. First, people must want to participate. Second, people must know how to participate. Finally, the participation

offered must be real and relevant.

For some people it is possible to take time off work without losing pay or if they do lose pay the amount lost is insignificant to their total income. For others it is not possible to take time off work without losing pay, without having to lie about the reason for their absence and without the risk of jeopardising and losing their jobs.

In studying what effects work in a factory has on an employee's life away from work, Martin Meissner concluded that the more repetitive, monotonous and inflexible the work was the less workers would participate in outside activities which necessitated "planning, co-ordination and purposeful" action.<sup>12</sup>

The models, the concepts, the notion of voluntary participation and corollary assumptions about low cost and limited equipment represent a mobilization of bias in favor of the middle-class:

"All forms of political organisation have a bias in favor of the exploitation of some kinds of conflict and the suppression of others because organisation is the mobilisation of bias. Some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out".<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, some people and some groups are organised into politics while others are organised out. The survival of the voluntary idea in effect discriminates against low-income groups to the advantage of middle-class, affluent and organised groups because (a) low income groups are more dependent on professional staff; (b) low income groups don't have the same resources as middle-class groups and (c) low income groups don't have the same personal opportunities as the more privileged middle-class groups.

We are talking about the politics of choice. As Neuhaus comments:

"The whole notion of 'issue-oriented politics' is alien to the poor. It assumes an ability to consider an issue on its own merits, objectively, so to speak. It assumes a freedom from the tyranny of immediacy, a freedom to reflect on the common weal and not just on that slice of public policy that impinges directly on one's own survival and welfare".<sup>14</sup>

## LEGITIMACY

In seeking control over radio stations we give them a new legitimacy. Changes in management are not revolutionary if the managers merely re-define the role of management, create a new privileged group and develop a vested interest in protecting their privileges.

Many proposals for community radio seek to install a new management within a traditional hierarchical method of organisation. These proposals fail to recognise the inhibiting and predetermining content of traditional organisation.<sup>15</sup>

Discussions about the role of the media, Government regulation and citizen involvement need to acknowledge and define the given realities of the present, and the extent to which these predetermine the agenda for debate, the choices and the possibilities.

Each of us operates with a consensus of fundamental beliefs, assumptions and expectations. This consensus can be overt/covert, submissive/aggressive. In essence, a submissive consensus is deferential to the definitions, dictates and demands of others whereas an aggressive consensus is self-assertive, initiatory and innovative. In this sense, each of us has a world-view, no matter how inadequate and incomplete, and this world-view is our measuring stick which defines, orders and interprets reality for us so that we

have an ordered, consistent and stable viewpoint concerning ourselves, others and our surroundings.<sup>16</sup>

People's behaviour and ways of thinking change slowly — changes can only come from new ideas and new experiences. The so-called revolution begs the question of the process by which a new society is created. This process depends on the development of radical critiques which demythologise institutional, representational and professional power and concretely demonstrate alternative ways of living and working. A campaign that aims at the successful democratisation of broadcasting necessitates these sorts of questions: Who has the power in broadcasting? Why do they have this power? What reinforces and legitimises this power? What are the obstacles to the transfer and transformation of this power? How do we transform power relationships? Who will support and who will oppose change? What strategy should be adopted? How is the campaign likely to proceed? How do you develop support in the community?

Radio will continue to remain the preserve of the few for as long as the majority of people don't think they can win, don't think they are capable of running their own lives, don't think beyond the next pay or the next meal, don't know about services and resources, don't know how to use services and resources and don't want to use services and resources. How do you get ordinary people to participate?

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